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ABSTRACT

The idea of making general psychology more accessible to and/or usable by the general public is considered (i.e., the idea of giving psychology away). A larger and related question is whether general psychology, as an academic course and as an orientation to psychology, should be approached as general studies. One impediment to giving psychology away is the size and complexity of the field. There are 44 divisions of the American Psychological Association that include such areas as general, teaching, physiological and comparative, and public service psychology. The size and complexity of the field may also have created the impression that the field lacks unity and cohesion. Some have proposed that psychology be dissected into smaller parts that would more readily be accepted by consumers. It is argued that this proposal would be detrimental to psychology in general. It is suggested that psychologists might help others appreciate the importance and uniqueness of the total field, not "pushing" psychology as a panacea, but rather acknowledging that the field is large and loosely organized and is still having growing pains. (SW)

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General Psychology: Too Much To Give Away?

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA, 1985.

Abstract

Over fifteen years ago, George Miller encouraged psychologists to make psychology more accessible to and/or usable by the general public. In short, he advocated that psychology be given away. A decade and one-half later, it is debatable as to how successful psychologists have been in their assigned task, or if the task should have been accepted in the first place. The present paper was presented as part of a symposium, presented at the 1985 meeting of the American Psychological Association, that addressed the question:"should General Psychology -- not just the academic course, but as an orientation to psychology -- be approached as General Studies? What does this mean? If it is, what effects -- positive and negative -- might this have on psychology? If not, what harms or benefits may occur?" The view adopted by this author is that such controversey has existed within the field of psychology literally since its inception. Hence, this is not a new demand or problem. Further, it would appear that psychology has grown to such proportions that it may be impossible to "give it away" without distorting it severely. Finally, it is argued that there may be a unique property or approach to the study of mankind that is achieved by the assemblage of the various facets of the field as they currently exist.

General Psychology: Too Much
To Give Away?

With regard to this presentation, I feel uncomfortably akin to Robert S. Woodworth and other Functionalists who were accused of "fence sitting" and refusing to take a firm stand on the issues. On the one hand, Dr. Miller, as we have seen, has urged us to give psychology away in order to better human welfare. Now, who in their right mind would object to the accomplishment of something that would better the human condition?

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that almost since the "official" founding of our discipline, psychologists have been faced with similar urgings and promptings. For example, in 1910 Hugo Munsterberg, in a delightful little volume titled American Problems, indicated that:

> Psychology has made rapid progress..., but our modern commerce and industry so far have profitted little from the advance. Goods are manufactured and distributed, bought and sold; at every stage the human mind is at work, since human minds are the laborers, are the salesmen, are the buyers; and yet no one consults the exact knowledge of the science that deals with the laws and characteristics of the human mind. (151-152)

Apparently, we psychologists were not very successful in peddling our wares between 1910 when Munsterberg wrote this passage and 1969 when Dr. Miller's Presidential Address was made to the

American Psychological Association and subsequently published in the American Psychologist (Miller, 1969).

Could it be that we have greatly underestimated psychology's popularity, and that we are really trying to give away a "red herring?" I certainly do not believe that this is the case. In support, Benjamin, Daniel, and Brewer (1985), in the preface to their fine new text, Handbook for Teaching Introductory Psychology, indicate that:

> Introductory psychology continues to be one of the most popular courses on college campuses today, enrolling an estimated 1.5 million students annually. It is possibly the most popular elective course among college students and, some sources say, among high school students as well.

If psychology is this popular, then it would seem reasonable to assume that there would be many interested recipients of our gifts. Possibly the reason we have been unsuccessful in our quest to give psychology away is that it has been difficult for us to indicate exactly what is being offered for the betterment of human welfare. In this regard, possibly we should try defining psychology a little more clearly, and then offer it once again. But there are some problems involved in even this seemingly simple undertaking. For example, in the introduction to his highly regarded text, Psychology, Henry Gleitman (1981) defines our field in the following manner:

> What is psychology? It is a field of inquiry that is sometimes defined as the science of

> the mind, sometimes as the science of behavior. The pheonomena that psychology takes as its province cover an enormous range. (1)

This definition suggests two problem areas that may have been impediments to our attempts to give psychology away. I would like to spend a few minutes examining these issues. First, Professor Gleitman refers to the enormous range of psychology's province. No where is the magnitude of our field more clearly reflected than by the fact that there are 44 divisions of the American Psychological Association. (Technically, there are only 42 because Divisions 4 and 11 are nonfunctional, but this would seem to be a moot point.) If the sheet number of divisions is not sufficient to impress one with psychology's size and diversity, then possibly a quick perusal of some of the division names might help. As a profession, psychology currently runs the gamut from General (Division 1) to Teaching (Division 2) to Physiological and Comparative (Division 6) to Public Service (Division 18) to Lesbian and Gay Issues (Division 44). Further, it is interesting to note that there are only a handful of cities in North America that are large enough to serve as hosts for the annual APA convention. And psychology does not seem to have leveled off in its growth rate. Some comparative figures derived from introductory psychology text books might help to illustrate and underscore this last point. A random sampling of six introductory psychology texts published in the late 1950's and early 1960's yielded a mean size of 476.40 pages. On the other hand, a similar sampling of texts published in the 1980's yielded a mean size of 543.33 pages.

The 14% increase in size has also been accompanied by a corresponding increase in the number and variety of research studies, review articles, and data that are cited -- let alone the casual observation that the books published in the 1980's are physically larger than those that were published twenty years earlier. In short, I am suggesting that psychology's current size and incredible complexity are deterrents to our being able to successfully give psychology away. Bluntly put, it seems quite possible that our would-be recipients are simply being overwhelmed by their potential gift.

Additionally, the size and complexity of our field also may have created the impression that we, as psychologists, are not in complete agreement about what exactly it is that we are trying to give away. The establishment of 44 divisions of the national professional psychological association might be taken by some outsiders as an indication that there is a lack of unity and cohesion within our field. Professor Gleitman's use of the word "sometimes" twice in his definition of psychology seems to reinforce this perception. Unfortunately, not knowing exactly who we are or what we are all about does not seem to be a new problem or issue for American psychologists to deal with. It has been with us since psychology was first put on public display at the Chicago World's Fair. In 1902, James Mark Baldwin has the following to say about psychology's public debut in our country:

> In conclusion, I may be allowed a word of reflection on the present state of experimental psychology as it is revealed in these exhibits. Most of the separate instruments are contrivances of particular men for the investigation of particular problems. The science has not yet reached the stage of real demonstration --- the stage at which its acknowledged results may be stated under general principles of critical value, whose truth may be shown by a few representative experiments. No doubt we shall, in the future, have more demonstration apparatus of recognized value --- apparatus indispensible to teachers in class instruction. But it must be admitted that instruction in this field is now very haphazard, and each teacher is a law unto himself, both as to what he shall teach and as to how he shall teach it. (p. 128)

If psychology is too large, complex, and confusing to give away, then why not dissect it into smaller, more disposable, pieces that would be more readily accepted by our consumers. To do this would, in my opinion, be detrimental to psychology in general. Another quote from James Mark Baldwin, might help amplify these feelings:

> In psychology the modern transformation comes most strongly out. Here we find an actual department

> of knowledge handed over to a class of men for treatment, so remarkable is the demand for scientific method. It is not longer sufficient that a psychologist should be familiar with general philosophy and its history, or capable of acute logical criticism of systems; it is necessary, if he would deal successfully with the new problems and gain the ear of the advanced philosophical public, that he should reason from a basis of fact and by an inductive procedure. In short, he must not bring his philosophy as speculation into psychology, but must carry his psychology as fact, in its connection with physiology, anthropology, etc., into general philosophy. (90-91)

We seem to be part and parcel of a very large, but unique, endeavor. I feel that much of this uniqueness would be lost by dismanteling psychology.

In this general context, Frank H. T. Rhodes, President of Cornell University, recently had the following to say about the "selling" of the liberal arts (Rhodes, 1985). Assuming you agree that psychology might (or should) be considered one of the liberal arts and that selling can roughly be likened to "giving away," then President Rhodes' message should be clear. He says:

> If we pin all our hopes on the liberal arts, I fear we shall have to settle for the spaghetti

> pot after all, for the advocates of the liberal arts have promised far more than they can ever deliver. Knowledge is not virtue; scholarship is not wisdom; research is not rectitude. The liberal arts alone will not make fools wise or knaves virtuous.
>
> What they offer is a foundation upon which we can build, strengthening those qualities that make us human. That foundation is of enormous worth and unique importance. It is as beautiful as it is practical, as important as it is intangible. We debase it by the selling of the liberal arts on any other basis.

Instead of giving psychology away, possibly we, as professionals, should concentrate more upon helping others to appreciate the importance and uniqueness of the total field -- not "pushing" psychology as a panacea, but rather acknowledging that we are an enormous, loosely organized field that still is having growing pains of the first magnitude, a field that will take considerable patience and study to understand. In short, I hope that we never lose sight of one of the ten introductory psychology course objectives proposed by Walker and McKeachie (1967). This objective states that we should "introduce the student the the full range of subject matter."

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